



## SLDS Issue Brief

### Effective Reporting on Research and Evaluation Findings from the SLDS

*This issue brief is intended to help states and territories develop strategies for effective reporting and use of information from internal and external evaluation and research findings that use the statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS). States can use this framework to conduct effective research and evaluation projects. The brief also offers guidance for communicating results to stakeholders and using research and evaluation projects to support SLDS sustainability.*

### Conducting Effective Research and Evaluation Projects

#### *Demonstrate alignment to priorities and needs*

Outlining what effective reporting and use of research and evaluation results should look like can illuminate the critical components that will make effective reporting and use a reality.

Consider the benefits of having a research agenda. Aligning research and evaluation with a research agenda

- communicates the organization's needs and priorities;
- maximizes the benefits of research for the organization;
- fills knowledge gaps; and
- helps the organization handle limited resources of staff, time, money, and methodological expertise.

If there is no formal research agenda, consider implementing strategies to ensure that a research request is aligned with organizational priorities. Such strategies might include implementing or revising your data request prioritization process, setting strategic goals, developing priority questions for the SLDS, and identifying program area needs and burning questions.

Demonstrating alignment to priorities and needs can be beneficial because it

- shows the value of the SLDS;
- helps to gain buy-in from data suppliers and stakeholders;

#### **What is the difference between evaluation and research?**

*Research* is the diligent and systematic inquiry or investigation into a subject in order to discover or revise facts, theories, applications, etc. The primary purpose of research is to add to knowledge in a field and to contribute to the growth of theory. Research seeks conclusions, and research questions are often generated by the researcher.

*Evaluation* is judging the worth or merit of something. It involves the identification, clarification, and application of defensible criteria to determine an object's worth or merit in relation to those criteria. The primary purpose of evaluation is to help those who hold a stake in whatever is being evaluated make a judgment or decision. Such stakeholders often comprise many different groups. Many sources, including the stakeholders and the evaluator, determine which questions will be answered in an evaluation.<sup>1</sup>

This product of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) SLDS Grant Program was developed with the help of knowledgeable staff from state education agencies and partner organizations. The content of this publication was derived from an SLDS regional meeting that took place in January 2017. The information presented does not necessarily represent the opinions of the IES SLDS Grant Program. We thank the following people for their valuable contributions:

Kathy Gosa  
*SLDS Grant Program, State Support Team*

Carla Howe, Ph.D.  
*SLDS Grant Program, State Support Team*

*For more information on the IES SLDS Grant Program or for support with system development, please visit <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/SLDS>.*

<sup>1</sup> Worthen, B. R., Sanders, J. R., & Fitzpatrick, J. L. (2004). *Program evaluation: Alternative approaches and practical guidelines*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

- minimizes redundancy in research and evaluation efforts;
- recognizes where gaps in research and evaluation exist; and
- supports planning for use of findings.

Communication is key to ensuring that others know that research and evaluation are happening and are aligned with priorities. Some examples of communications that demonstrate alignment are

- presentations that showcase specific links between research projects and organization priorities;
- a one-page summary displaying which priorities the research findings address;
- an icon or logo that is associated with the research agenda and is included in the research or evaluation findings;
- footnotes in the research findings that reference the research agenda question or priority; and
- links to research findings alongside research agenda questions.

Aligning research questions with district, gubernatorial, legislative, and executive leadership goals also can make it easier to share data in compliance with federal privacy regulations. If such alignment is achieved, disclosing personally identifiable information (PII) from education records for the research could be allowed, with proper agreements, under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act's (FERPA's) audit and evaluation exception.<sup>2</sup> However, research projects usually do not require PII, and de-identified data can be shared without any FERPA considerations.

### *Plan for effective reporting*

Begin with the end in mind. Take steps at the beginning and during the project to ensure that it is headed in the right direction. This can be done by thinking through the project's end goals at the start of the research project and then revisiting them throughout the process to ensure that they are being met.

Set expectations in the beginning about the end products and goals. Consider different groups with whom to set expectations, understanding that each group likely will have a different set of expectations based on its focus and needs. For example, if a research project focuses on the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs, each stakeholder group may have different expectations about what the results should help them do:

- *Educators* may be looking for the courses and training programs that can make them more effective in the classroom.
- *Policymakers* may want to know which universities are the best at educating teachers.

- *School administrators* may be most concerned about the factors used to determine effectiveness.

With clear descriptions about which decisions the findings are meant to inform, stakeholders will know and understand the intent and purpose of the research. If the study does not satisfy their needs, they can then communicate those needs more clearly for a future study.

Once the project has launched, monitor the progress of the evaluation and/or research work to ensure that it is on schedule. Monitoring and sharing the progress allow the organization to address challenges before they become problems and build trust among the researchers, the organization, and the data suppliers. Because research projects often take months or years to complete, monitoring and sharing also help maintain interest in the project and remind those for whom the topic is a priority to plan how they will use the results. Holding regular meetings to discuss progress helps ensure that no one is surprised at the end.

As the research or evaluation project ends, prepare the findings and use the plan developed in the beginning to share results. Additional steps may be necessary. They may include

- determining the timing for sharing or publishing the results;
- planning for future evaluation or research projects needed as a result of the findings; and/or
- reaching out to additional stakeholder groups who could use the findings despite not being identified initially as interested parties.

### *Strategies for engaging stakeholders in research and evaluation*

Stakeholder groups who are engaged in the research and evaluation process can be advocates for the SLDS and may offer additional resources to support the SLDS. Engaging stakeholders provides public transparency and helps an organization to make data-driven decisions. Stakeholders also can inform the project and focus the work. To increase involvement of stakeholders, consider expanding the research request process to involve stakeholders earlier or more frequently.

Stakeholder engagement in the research and evaluation process can present some challenges. Gaining trust and understanding requires a significant investment of time and effort. When new individuals become part of a stakeholder group due to staff changes, they may have a different perspective and it may be necessary to restart the process of engaging them in the process. Often, aligning schedules to convene a group can be difficult. Another challenge is possible when individuals enter the conversation with unknown motives, or a purpose that is contrary to that of the organization or of other stakeholders.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/pdf/reasonablemt\\_d\\_agreement.pdf](https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/pdf/reasonablemt_d_agreement.pdf)

A strategy to effectively engage stakeholders in the research and evaluation process is to leverage existing committees or meetings. Key stakeholders already are working around other committees' schedules and are familiar with others on their committees, which increases efficiency. They also might be aware of additional people or resources that could help with the process.

To ensure that all stakeholders have access to research and evaluation reports, consider how the reports could be shared virtually, such as in a webinar or via the organization's website. Making information accessible facilitates the use of the findings. Supporting documentation can further increase the likelihood that the study's results will inform policy and practice.

### Supporting SLDS Sustainability Through Evaluation and Research Findings

Sustainability is the capacity to support a system or program over time with sufficient financial and human resources to meet current and future needs. Sustainability helps ensure that the SLDS's intended outcomes are met and establishes trust among partners. When stakeholders are confident that the SLDS is sustainable, they will be more willing to incorporate its use into their work.

Reporting evaluation and research findings effectively can support the four components of SLDS sustainability:

- **Stakeholder support** for and use of evaluation and research makes the SLDS more relevant and accurate,

provides feedback that improves data quality, and makes the SLDS a trusted resource for research.

- **Widespread use** of research or evaluation findings increases the degree of stakeholder engagement and demonstrates how important the SLDS is to stakeholders and their work.
- **Financial support** is necessary to maintain and enhance the SLDS to keep it relevant and effective. Communicate to partner agencies what the SLDS can provide and encourage them to make the SLDS part of their own infrastructure so that they use their own resources to answer important questions. Consider charging a fee to cover the cost of fulfilling research requests.
- The SLDS offers stakeholders a **return on investment**. For example, the SLDS might save one group the time and effort of collecting information for required reports. For another group, the SLDS might inform risk indicators, which can lead to remediation that affects students financially or academically. Demonstrating return on investment can be compelling, so promoting it is important. Consider quantitative and qualitative benefits that are possible because of SLDS data use.

With sustainability in mind, organizations should think critically about their research and evaluation data products, discuss ways to ensure effective reporting, and determine how they can be used to demonstrate the value of the SLDS.



Figure 1. The Sustainability Framework

## **Additional Resources**

Developing a Robust Research Agenda that the SLDS Can Support: SLDS Issue Brief

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/10124>

Increasing Organizational Capacity: Successful Partnerships and Collaboration with Researchers: SLDS Webinar

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/10162>

Implementing a Research Agenda: SLDS Issue Brief

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/12974>

Strategies for Data System Sustainability: SLDS Issue Brief

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/11735>